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## Challenges in Contemporary Theology

### *A Call to Change the World*

The first Christians had a reputation for changing society. Their enemies accused them of “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). The followers of Jesus Christ revolutionized the way men and women thought about God and life’s priorities, how they treated one another and how they interpreted what was going on around them. The message they preached offered change and hope. Within a few years of its launch the church began to confront and contribute to the collapse of an empire and a panoply of entrenched deities and ancient faith systems. In no time at all, despite attempts from the highest levels to stamp them out, they came to shake the political, philosophical and social foundations of their world.

Fast forward. The UN World Heritage-listed Cathedral of Notre Dame in Chartres (built 1194-1220), west of Paris, is arguably the most beautiful church building in the world. During the Middle Ages, when few people could read or write, one of the vehicles used by the church for teaching stories were stained glass windows. Cathedrals across Europe came to be filled with windows graphically depicting scenes from the Old Testament, the Gospels, church history and major events of the times. Popular ideas about God, Jesus, judgment, Heaven, Hell, the Apostles, heroes of the church and its contemporary hierarchy often came from these sources.

Unfortunately, the vision a lot of people still have of Jesus is fixed in stained glass windows or images in churches. This Jesus, who is artificial and untouchable, does not communicate to people living in the Third Millennium. Such “religion” leads to loss of purpose, identity, personality, values and connection to people’s priorities.

### *Remaining Relevant -Geared to the Times, Anchored to The Rock*

Down through the centuries, Jesus has not changed (Hebrews 13:8). But society and “church” and the way they intersect have changed considerably. What does the church look like to an outsider today: contemporary music, up-to-date furnishings and high quality audio-visual facilities. That response confuses “church” with buildings. It says nothing about the relevance and power of the Gospel or the church to the human condition.

Jesus connected with people in the street because he responded to peoples’ felt needs and provided answers that were relevant to daily life. The majority of His followers continue to be ordinary people (1 Corinthians 1:26-29); the message is as relevant today as it was two thousand years ago. Relevant Christianity is still characterized by God’s love in action, building bridges, reaching down and out to others with credibility. The Bible says that the Christian community grows and builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16).

Stagnant churches talk about love but outsiders recognize if it is in short supply. Other churches are confused about what they teach. The relevant church will demonstrate God’s character and make disciples of Christ who recognize and are motivated by divine love. This type of church will reach non-Christians and unchurched believers. God’s love within will go beyond verbal expressions and operate like a powerful magnet.

People’s needs also make them more, or less, open to the Gospel. For example, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Eastern European communities were open to the Gospel and churches in parts of the Baltic States grew quickly; however, as they became more affluent/Western, felt needs diminished and the early success of evangelism/church planting levelled off.

*Relevant to all people and cultures?*

Christianity is perceived by many of its critics as having lost touch with reality. It is seen as abstract and theoretical. Some Christians and churches have eccentric cultures. Look at the religious paraphernalia that has grown up around Jesus' name: solid bookmarks made from Lebanon Cedar or olive wood from the Garden of Gethsemane or the Mount of Olives; a bottle of "Holy Water" from the Jordan River, "where Jesus was baptised" (it has a cute picture of the Holy Spirit descending from heaven, on the side of the box); battery operated angels that glow in the dark and play "Holy, Holy, Holy"; "herbs from the Holy Land - like those Mary would have used in her cooking"; "Biblical scents" exuding "the smells that greeted Jesus in the Garden"; Dead Sea bath salts "to give you a heavenly lift"; cups with inspirational sayings; Lily of the Valley and Rose of Sharon soap; tea bags with Bible verses on the labels, "for that special moment"; Bible verse candy canes; and "faith" jelly beans.

Cultures change. It is now possible to sit in a grass hut in a developing country and access the Internet using solar powered satellite telephones. Cultures change even though the Gospel does not (its message is eternal); we therefore need to be able to present the message effectively to new human contexts.

Language can also be a stumbling block? People do not grasp the Gospel if the terms we use and the concepts we present are alien to them (regeneration, sanctification, propitiation, catechism). The assumptions they have about the nature of truth, God, sin and sacrifice are different from statements contained in Christian creeds or liturgies. It is possible for the unchurched to be so focused on the architecture, iconography and styles of the church that they completely miss the personality of Jesus Christ. The message we declare is authenticated when we are real, lives that are unequivocal, clear, meaningful, contemporary and attractive.

Modern men and women reject extremism, but often end up standing for nothing at all. Many modern young people feel their leaders fail to take them seriously and articulate clear directions, that politics and business lack moral fibre. They have a culture of "no-values". They reject the voices of the past and one-size-fits-all religious dogmatism. People don't want church life to be reduced to meaningless repetition. What works in pluralistic, reductionist, syncretistic societies where all bets are off and social taboos are no longer sacrosanct?

People today are increasingly mobile, physically and mentally. They have gone from book to screen and their world has shrunk. Many of the old models, jargon and ceremonies no longer work. Young people are prepared to experiment with other religions. They have more information available to them than any other generation in history. They are interactive and multi-channel. They sit in front of screens and anonymously chat with virtual communities across the globe. They absorb a wide range of attitudes, symbols, music, languages and sounds. If we are to reach them, the narrative has to be diverse, high-tech, relational and culturally relevant, without changing the central message. We need to engage effectively and imaginatively and get closer in practice to the heart of Jesus' message.

There is a growing trend for Christian formation outside of traditional church structures. People want church life that is not boring, monotonous, unpleasant, materialistic or non-directional; worship services that are as attractive for young people as for their parents, because they stem from "life". Men and women respond to preaching and counselling that make sense and work; prayer that comes from the heart, not endless repetition (every denomination and single-issue church or home group has its own rote); worship that focuses joy on God, not just the moment; meaningful programs that promote Jesus, not leaders; hope that does not fade; relationship with a God who is objectively "there", where they are; who speaks to them, in their own language.

They need grace that forgives, transforms and reconciles people; spiritual life that transcends the material, but meets needs; love that builds families and provides a bedrock for marriage and family; and meaningful Biblical absolutes that (by definition) don't change, but apply to each and any cultural setting.

Relevant Christianity is led by empowering leadership. Churches today are full of people who have God's call on their lives but will never be equipped and released to realize their potential because of religious protectionism and lack of vision. Effective and mature Christian ministry concentrates on equipping and empowering men and women for God's service (as Jesus did). Healthy church life talks less about "laity" (not a New Testament concept), looks less like pyramids and more like a nurturing environment, where Christians have the "fire" of God, the love of Jesus in their hearts and are encouraged to allow the Holy Spirit to make them what God wants them to be.

Christianity focuses on Jesus, not man; it reflects God's energy and purpose and is unashamedly Christo-centric (Romans 1:16). Only the power of God can transform people. Fulfilled lives answer the existential questions and make the Gospel relevant.

What shape will a reinvented church have? What ideas will predominate? What model are we trying to achieve? How much of the past should be carried forward? How can we evangelize modern cities? What is the future of the church as we know it? What is the future role of parachurch organisations?

The denominational franchise model (in which all churches look the same, like McDonalds) does not need to constrict us. Practices that worked well fifty (or even twenty) years ago may not do so any longer; some are timeless and will work in practically any generation and culture.

## Issues Facing the World Christian Movement Today

- Keeping in Touch with God and the World Around Us - Being relevant means living God's way in a way that touches our world. Jesus was effective in his day because he was empowered and infused with the power of God, not just following rules. His followers were passionately and contagiously enthusiastic about Him because they had a genuine relationship with Him and knew he truly cared for them. Young people today are better educated, more clued-up than any previous generation, but they are also more alone. They don't want to hear clichés. They feel their elders are out of touch and have nothing in common with them. They are more prepared than ever to jettison irrelevant values and practices. Old ecclesiastical governance, practices, dress, language, styles, worship are seen as irrelevant. We don't keep in touch by retreating to caves or tradition, but by being anointed by the Holy Spirit to change the world.
- Secularism ("Indifference to, or rejection or exclusion of, religion and religious considerations" - Merriam Webster Dictionary). The church in the West is declining in a secular environment (many Christians are hijacked by secular thinking, often because they do not know what they really believe, or why). However, when people give up on church, they don't give up on spirituality. Instead, they shop around for alternatives to sterile religion. They walk away from rigid tradition and shallow spirituality because tradition alone doesn't work beyond the placebo level if rigor mortis has set in, but they remain spiritual beings, made in the image of God, with spiritual needs. What the world needs, and Christians can be channels to deliver, is the transformative power of God.

- Legalism - Living by “law” (as distinct from grace) for salvation. “But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’” (Acts 5:5) In churches and Christians where legalism predominates spiritual passion is invariably below average. The emphasis is on compliance with rules, not relationship with the Living God. Rules are not the problem; there is a way we should live; but rules should never become the drivers for their own sake. Combatting legalism was Paul’s theme in Galatians (likewise in Colossians 2:20-23 and Romans 14). Christ has come to set us free from dead legalism; the Holy Spirit enables us to fulfil all of God’s laws through the principles of loving God and loving people (the two greatest commandments; Matthew 22:37-40) and making us like Jesus.
- Antinomianism - Latin *anti* = against, Greek *nomos* = law. Belief that, under the Gospel of grace the Biblical or moral law are not an obligation because faith alone saves. “We are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:15, cf Matthew 10:4). This is true, but antinomianism as a theology leads to “cheap grace” and an excuse to keep on sinning. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 6:1, 2). Christians are not bound by “laws”, but by a higher spiritual law, which is geared at holiness - this is one of the underlying messages of Romans.
- Liberalism - Latin *liber*, which means “free”. The Sadducees were the liberals of Jesus day. They rejected the supernatural, including angels, spirits, resurrection, judgement, divine intervention in the world. Jesus criticised them for “knowing neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29). In modern times, known as Higher Criticism, modernism, neo-theology; strong German influence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and American in the 20<sup>th</sup>. Liberals believe that the Bible may or may not contain the Word of God or words about God, a book, written by men, for men, that its stories are folklore that should not be taken literally and can be adjusted to meet modern needs, that it has no moral or spiritual authority, statements in the Bible that are contrary to modern science may be ruled out, Jesus was not divine (what is divine anyway?), reject ideas of sin, judgement, atonement, focussing instead of ethics. “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. (Colossians 2:8-10)
- Deism - belief in a God or god who created the universe but does not exercise control over life or natural phenomena and does not give supernatural revelation. Our God is real and He came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to bring us into living relationship. All that we do must spring from life.
- Scientism - The suggestion that the physical sciences are the only way to understand the world) and *positivism* (the belief that the scientific method replaces faith) have closed people's minds to the power and perception of the spiritual realm. Theories of biological evolution developed by Charles Darwin and others, stating that all species arise and develop through the natural selection of small, inherited variations that increase the individual's ability to compete, survive, and reproduce, need careful understanding by Christians. Rejects creationism. The church needs to understand the science and have reasoned and credible responses that remain anchored to the Bible but are not closed to new factual scientific discoveries. For many Christians that is a difficult balance.

- Political Theology - Churches differ as to how to approach the topic of the “last days”, how to interpret the books of Daniel and Revelation and position themselves in post renaissance, post Industrial Revolution Western society. Many American movements and churches (Moral Majority; so-called Religious Right; Christian Zionism), focus their interpretation of the world and eschatology on the role of America as “God’s agent” in world affairs, theocracy and a biased view of modern Israel. In doing so, they alienate communities/paradigms, which other Christians believe in. Christians need to be wary of adopting their own dangerous forms of *Jihadism*.
- Separation of church and state - how far should the separation go? what is the role of the church in the world? eg “Judeo-Christian foundations”; links between the church and politics and business; treatment of difficult issues surfaced by lobby groups. Some churches are bound up in nationalism (eg Orthodox). Jesus said that we should give God what belongs to Him and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (Mark12:17). The church should not operate along partisan lines. Political parties should have active Christians in their membership, who can be salt and light, raise issues in their respective communities and influence legislation to combat poverty, injustice, degradation of moral standards, and so on, while not compromising what they believe. Christians *should* be involved in social justice issues, but avoid becoming entangled in “right” versus “left” debates.
- Liberation Theology - A movement in Roman Catholicism that interprets and applies the Bible to modern society in a way that is directed to achieving political, economic and social justice, often through the application of Marxist ideology and military means. Popular in Latin America in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, liberation theology continues to appeal to the poor in parts of the USA and Latin America. The rise of (Argentinian) Pope Francis, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, has sparked renewed interest in the application of a Biblical support of the poor and marginalised by revolutionary means. Jesus described His movement as a spiritual struggle, not a political one (John 18:36).
- Moral Ambiguity - Gender and morality issues have come to affect the church, often as much as the non-Christian community, including in the areas of:
  - ⇒ increased level of marriage collapse and divorce, including among Christians
  - ⇒ acceptance of homosexuality and same sex marriages in the church, including in ministry
  - ⇒ more radical forms of feminism
  - ⇒ sexual abuse by clergy
  - ⇒ official recognition of *de facto* marriages
  - ⇒ acceptance/support for abortion and euthanasia
  - ⇒ support for adoption by same-sex couples, undermining the role of the family
  - ⇒ debates over the justness of war, capital punishment
- Bioethics - Ethical Dilemmas: Many developments are good; others challenge traditional church teaching:
  - ⇒ human genetics
  - ⇒ stem cell research
  - ⇒ assisted reproductive technology that involve destruction of embryos
  - ⇒ foetal research
  - ⇒ some organ transplant technology, including animal to human
  - ⇒ cloning
  - ⇒ assisted suicide

- Pluralism - “The blind men and the elephant” analogy is a popular analogy used to show that all religions are valid ways to describe God. Religion professors love this parable, because it equalizes all religions, making all religions equally “true” in their description of God, ie no individual religion has a corner on truth, but all should be viewed as essentially equally valid. Through globalism, migration, rapid spread of knowledge and ideas and interest in diverse traditions, Australia has experienced an influx and expansion of religious traditions. A religiously diverse nation. Hindu and Buddhist temples, Sikh *gurdwaras*, and Muslim mosques sit alongside Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. cf *The Life of Pi*. Pluralism is proclaimed as the ground for melting all religions into a porridge of new religious ideas. Court decisions target churches proclaiming the Gospel in a pluralistic society (eg anti-vilification laws). Blind pluralism leads to undermining of (and hostility towards) Christians values in the education sphere. Also erodes Christian counselling through privacy and disclosure rules. Much inter-faith dialogue washes away distinctives and weakens the unique claims of the Gospel.
- Environmental issues - Christians need to understand and have an informed, relevant and redemptive approach to ecology, climate change and global warming, and understand our obligation to the world God has created.
- Post-modernism, the philosophical and cultural successor of modernism, has undermined the absolute certainty of science and other belief structures. Post-modernism seeks to discredit religious faith as truth; insists “there is no one truth”. Post-modern values include the rejection of hierarchy, suspicion of institutions and strong emphasis on personal choice as the final arbiter.
- Syncretism - The mixing of faith systems and observing them as one is called “syncretism”. It is a framework, a process by which elements of a single set of world views are harmonized and assimilated into another, resulting in a change in the nature of both of them and the emergence of a new system, a revised set of beliefs and rules. It is a union of theologies. The synthesized form is a new product, although separate segments retain some identifiable components, such as a high altar, sacrifices, or a witchdoctor’s tools of trade. I have seen syncretism at work in some African churches, where animism and other traditional religions have been wedded to the Christian message; and in Latin America, where the mass is observed inside the church and chickens are sacrificed llama foetuses burned outside, by the same people. Syncretism springs from lack of faith in Christ’s saving power. Food for thought: is so-called “prosperity teaching” a form of syncretism, by linking consumerism and materialism to God’s blessing? Are there other things we add to the worship of God to make us relevant, but cannot see as such because we are subjectively involved?
- “Franchise” Mc Churches - McDonalds is well known for mass producing fast food in a generic way, aimed at younger people, often attracting children because of give-aways (gimmicks) amid a splash of colourful advertising. Customers landing in any city in the world where McDonalds has outlets can generally predict what the menu will look like, what the food and coffee will taste like, the physical lay-out and the broad price range. There are temptations in the West for churches to adopt the McDonalds corporatized, or franchise, approach. Why have individuality when the shape and content of the burger can be prescribed and all you need to do is smile and offer a fast food approach to spirituality. Just don’t hang around for depth. Catholics, Anglicans, Pentecostals all run the risk of doing it, as do “streams” such as Hillsong, Willow Creek, Vineyard, Redeemer. On the other hand, globalisation has resulted in proliferation of “glocal” models people feel comfortable with.

- Growth in the cults.
- Fragmentation of Organised Christianity -
  - ⇒ The church has been seriously divided for more than a thousand years, beginning with the “Great Schism” of 1053, the division of Chalcedonian Christianity into Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) branches, later known as the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The reasons were largely centred on political power shifts, the decline of Rome, debates about the source of the Holy Spirit, whether leavened or unleavened bread should be used in Communion (the Eucharist) and where the power and governance of the church should reside (Rome or Constantinople, now called Istanbul).
  - ⇒ The Reformation was the next great schism.
  - ⇒ Christians around the world are now found in more than forty thousand denominations. These range in size from millions of members to less than one hundred members and are listed for each of the world’s 238 countries in the World Christian Database. By 2025, there will likely be fifty-five thousand denominations. The vast majority of these denominations will be Protestant and Independent, forming the core of global evangelicalism.
  - ⇒ The majority of Christians are found in countries outside of the “West”.
    - For the first time in history (2013), the Roman Catholic Church is headed by a Pope from a developing country.
- Individualism - “I’m OK”. People do not want to be “widgets” or numbers in church programs.
  - Privatism - “Me and Jesus, my faith, my personal interpretation, my program, my plans and my way”. People are less engaged with one another (also evident in politics and public affairs, civic clubs and community organizations, work-related organizations, social clubs - a generational issue; while new religious organizations have emerged in recent years, they have been less connected to the wider community than older denominations). The privatized, “feel-good” religion of recent church history is not only inadequate for the modern age, but a corruption of the church’s faith. The Biblically supported church is a culture that embodies the communal stories of Jesus Christ and His followers, in fellowship with one another, ie individuals who are part of a community.
  - Anti-institutionalism - “don’t tell me what to do”.
- Relativism - anything goes if it can be justified and if it feels right.

## Responding to the Issues

“But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

“But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.” (2 Peter 2:1, 2)

“Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.” (Jude 3, 4)

## *Re-positioning*

The church must realise it now operates in a more sophisticated, demanding, materialistic, self-centred world. People today get together in common-interest groups (eg on the Internet). 'Church on Sundays' is being supplemented by church-when-ever-it-is-convenient. There are growing groups of divorced people, singles, people who cohabit and feel alienated from churches, or have work arrangements that make options necessary. Today's songs are less 'theologically objective', more about individual themes; preaching is more life-related, less theological. People are suspicious of organisations trying to sell them things. But they still have spiritual needs.

- ⇒ Alpha Courses are successful partly because they are organised by local churches or work groups to fit their particular circumstances.
- ⇒ The apostles' strategy was to go to people and form the church around them. We must encourage radical criticism of the “me” mould.

If we are to reach others with the Gospel we need to be able to distil what they are experiencing, what they need, what's important to them and what excites them. We need the Holy Spirit's help to do this - otherwise we won't last the distance.

Power Gospel - silver and gold analogy

## *Re-Focusing the Message*

“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.” (2 Corinthians 4:3-7)

The Christian message is not meant to be confined to buildings, creeds, programs or denominations. The Gospel is relevant to every generation. Jesus is above culture; He transcends it. Instead of changing Him into our likeness, He transforms us into His own image, by the Holy Spirit. Culture can get in the way, but Christ came into human culture and sends us out into the world to share His eternal message and love.

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## Understanding Underlying Issues

### *Back to Basics in a Forward-Looking Way*

The Apostle Paul encouraged Christians in the first church at Corinth not to lose sight of their pure and simple devotion to Christ, not to add anything to it, but hold firm to the simplicity of the Christian message (2 Corinthians 11:3). We can add nothing to what Jesus has already done for us, but need to know what we believe and be committed to it, holding to the absolutes of Biblical revelation, living by our faith.

Young people growing up in church have a fear - almost a phobia - about distinctiveness, of being rejected because they are different. They don't want to be associated with the image of the small, traditional, suburban church with a hall, a manse, an old worship style and an aging membership.

The church of the future must employ culturally sensitive evangelism, without being seduced to conform. Otherwise, the natural process of syncretism and conditioning will increasingly lead to the acceptance and validation of extra-Biblical offshoots such as Christian feminism, Christian gay groups, atheistic philosophies in Christian schools, removing Christ from Christmas and Easter celebrations and a host of similar developments in respectable ecclesial circles.

Christian leaders need to have a Biblical theology and know how to operationalize it.